

Intellectual Freedom: Everything is Dangerous

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“Everything is dangerous...” — Michel Foucault

In a series of lectures conducted near the end of his life, Michel Foucault examined the emergence and evolution of the Greek term *Parrhesia*, roughly “all-telling”. In a felicitous mistranslation, the lectures were published in English under the title *Fearless Speech*. This English rendering of the Greek captures one point of Foucault’s emphasis which holds true today, and which I want to take as my theme in what follows.

Frank speaking and the intellectual freedom it supposes is always a complex, perilous, and contested reality. More a privilege than a right, sometimes an onerous obligation, its practice periodically requires courage in the face of a host of forces acting and speaking against it—if not the kinds of lethal persecution visited on figures like Socrates or Giordano Bruno, or even the censorship and book burnings of more spectacular times, then the subtler forms of social ostracism, economic disenfranchisement, psychological harm and professional marginalisation.

Nothing eternal or transcendent guarantees the survival of intellectual freedom in its different forms and dimensions: neither the institutions built to enshrine it; nor the methodologies of inquiry on which its meaningful practice rests; nor the individuals and communities who are its votaries. Its enemies are legion: inherited prejudices, immanent and transcendent; the invariant need of scholars to belong and to conform; the material necessities that still prevent

the greatest number from accessing either the leisure or other means to freely inquire; the inveterate aversion even the most liberal-minded person feels to “negative instances” facing beliefs s/he has taken to be compelling; and today, the single-minded pursuit of “utility” or economic growth to which public policy is wedded around the world, “to the exclusion of all others”.

At each stage of *Parrhesia*’s emergence in the Greek texts, Foucault points to tensions characterising the very idea, as well as the practice of this “frank speech”. In the democratic age, for instance, the formal and institutionalised right of all male citizens to speak openly in the Athenian assemblies and law courts created conditions which favoured demagoguery: the short-sighted flattery of the *hoi polloi* which would lead Athens into disaster through the regnancy of figures like Alcibiades and Cleon. Yet the dependency of the privileged intellectual advisor on the monarch or tyrant, in an alternative ancient model of *parrhesia*, hardly insulates the former from difficulties of the kind Dionysius duly visited on Plato. *Mutatis mutandis*, this form of *parrhesia* hardly insures the *hoi polloi* from the danger of prescriptions which scorn the public good in the name of serving the ends of a privileged few.

Such tensions about “intellectual freedom” seem to go all the way down. To inquire as and into what subjects we want—which is most often intended when we use this term—is not the freedom to arbitrarily posit as and what we wish. If it is to be meaningful, such freedom will be subordinated to epistemic values like the desire for truth or wisdom. But to discover a truth or truths is to be bound by them, as Hannah Arendt noted. The “freedom” to deny a round earth or climate change, despite confirmation after confirmation across centuries or decades, is scarcely worth the term. Freedom of thought implies openness to be challenged and criticised, and criticism is never pleasant, especially when it is earnt and demands retraction or revision. Sometimes, if our opinion seems to critics to be not simply erroneous but rationally groundless or self-serving, criticism can become personal and abusive.

There are always, finally, potential tensions between truth, an epistemic value, and people’s normative convictions about the right, the good, the socially necessary or expedient. Many established, collective practices have rested either on shared illusions or on the ignorance about the whole truth of at least one involved party—an historical premise from which we can, incidentally, infer that many of our established beliefs and practices today will seem foolish to future generations, should intellectual freedom prevail.

No one then should in no way take intellectual freedom for granted. In the words of Walter G. Metzger in an important 20th century study on the subject:

No one can follow the history of academic freedom ... without

wondering at the fact that any society, interested in the immediate goals of solidarity and self-preservation, should possess the vision to subsidize free criticism and inquiry, and without feeling that the academic freedom we still possess is one of the remarkable achievements of man. At the same time, one cannot but be appalled at the slender thread by which it hangs, at the wide discrepancies that exist among institutions with respect to its honouring and preservation; and one cannot but be disheartened by the cowardice and self-deception that frail men use who want to be both safe and free. With such conflicting evidence, perhaps individual temperament alone tips the balance toward confidence or despair.

Today, despair reigns ascendant in the universities which were set up, at least in part, to provide enclaves for intellectual freedom. These institutions were established, first in medieval Europe and then in different modern configurations, on the model of public corporations or trusts, as against private businesses or direct arms of government. If free inquiry in the service of discovering truths, preserving traditions, and cultivating educated citizens is to flourish, the thought was, it must be insulated (as far as possible) from the pressures facing people in economic or political life: pressures whose effect on intellectual inquiry will foreseeably favour suppressing or misrepresenting inconvenient truths; strategically calculating disclosure or deceit; and basing claims, where necessary, on different forms of well-seeming sophistry.

Blind or double-blind peer review, for instance, is a practice intended to insulate the assessment of scholars' knowledge claims from the vested interests of "governments ecclesiastic, monarchic or oligargic", so only the best-qualified, neutral readers will assess its merits. Tenure, likewise, is a medieval inheritance supposed to protect scholars from fear of firing for pursuing their inquiries wherever evidence and argument may take them. It is predicated on a sense that the scholar cannot perform optimally, pursuing truth without fear or favour, as a vulnerable employee, an interested advocate, or an invested entrepreneur.

But today, publics' "trust" around the world has been eroded by decades of "culture wars". This mistrust has been cultivated in the business and governing elites by neoconservative discourses about "liberal" or "left-wing" elites allegedly monopolising chairs, appointments, editorial boards, and suppressing intellectual freedom in the universities. Neoliberal "public choice" doctrines convergently suggest that all human behaviour is so inveterately self-interested that the only way "efficiency" can be wrought from this crooked timber is by institutionalising regimes of surveillance and auditing: in the case of academia, quantifying scholarly work (books, articles, now citation counts

and grant dollars) and placing scholars, in new ways, in competition with each other for the material preconditions of their trade (fellowships, jobs, grants, promotions). University publishing houses have been commercialised or shut down; academic journals have likewise been widely bought up by commercial publishers, who resell electronic access to them to university libraries; and collegial self-governance has been supplanted by increasing numbers of managers coming from the private sector, without experience in teaching and higher education. The casualization of teaching and increasing of class sizes has led to significant “deskilling” in the “sector”, robbing individuals of the time or *scholia* to keep abreast of their fields, let alone broaden their minds. The “block grants” that were hitherto entrusted to universities to teach and research have been rolled back, making institutional funding dependent on increased marketing outlays, corporate sponsorship, and privately-funded researches often contingent upon academics signing in-confidence agreements to ensure the patentability of results.

Increasingly, as this week, stories circulate in the global media about scholars being pressured to say “the right things” by universities’ sponsors or the academic board; or even being demoted or fired, like Thane Naberhaus and Ted Egan at Mount St. Mary’s University in the US. These men were sacked for an alleged lack of “loyalty” to their University, after criticising inflammatory remarks made by its President. Entire humanities departments are being shut down, given the difficulty of rationalising the liberal arts in the terms of today’s regnant economism.

These conditions have understandably led to a closing of ranks amongst the academic community, together with a nostalgia for former institutional dispensations. Yet if everything is not dangerous, per Foucault’s *bon mot*, little is, was, or probably ever will be untroubled or perfect.

While learning and scholarship are directed, in themselves, towards discovering and transmitting truth, knowledge, and the cultivation of educated men and women, the institutionalisation of learning and scholarship involves forms of professionalization, many of whose marks and practices look back to precedents in the medieval guilds and aristocratic courts. Socrates may have questioned the slave boy in the marketplace, and delighted in calling forth his geometrical knowledge. But within any scholarly institution, even the most learned slave must earn her stripes, if the truth she is to speak is to be taken seriously in a conference hall, let alone by an academic publisher, an appointments panel, or a grants committee. Each discipline at any given time has what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called its own *habitus*, invisible to insiders but readily apparent to newcomers: its accepted ways of speaking, writing, referring (and deferring) to established authorities; its hierarchies of prestige

and power, up to and including institutional powers to appoint and promote; its established paths of credentialisation; and its unwritten 'dos' and 'do nots', sanctions, incentives and perks. Any novice into a discipline must accordingly learn these unwritten rules if they are to win the material and symbolic capital to build a viable career in the field:

On the one hand, [...] disciplines are useful epistemic categories that allow for the production of expert knowledge [...] On the other hand, [...] disciplines are political entities that wall off and control domains of discourse [...] (Frodeman & Briggles)

The legitimacy of this self-monitoring control turns upon the aforementioned protection of intellectual freedom from political, economic or other external determinants or "conflicts of interest". The internal dangers to this legitimacy, and thereby to intellectual freedom, come from the inveterate tendency of established opinions to harden into rigid, unquestioned orthodoxies; the tendency of scholarly disciplines in an increasingly specialised intellectual world to close in on themselves (scholars writing for scholars about scholars in languages closed to non-scholars, or even scholars across the hallway); the pressures favouring flattery over frank speech that operate in any hierarchical organisation; the sense of entitlement which comes from achieving any high place or belonging to any specialised status group; and the sometimes-fierce hostility to work which aims to criticise, apply or "popularise" intradisciplinary knowledges as a means to challenge, contextualise, and thereby open out its specialised knowledges to wider debate.

I add the propensity of "insiders," particularly in conditions of growing threat to their status-group privileges, to react with fear and scorn towards the wider economic and political world within which their profession is nested and threatened. There is what German historian Fritz Stern has called a "politics" to "the unpolitical man" who considers himself and peers as the beleaguered guardians of the realm of the "spirit", soaring above the mundane concerns that divide the many. As the widespread, troubling compliance of the German academic sector in National Socialism reflects, this politics is almost always tendentially antidemocratic, since its determinative axis is "expert versus non-expert": the latter of whom will always vastly outnumber the former.

The threats faced by intellectual freedom today, then, in addition to those it has always faced, seem to this author to come not simply from the new economistic fundamentalism that has undermined the university as a public trust. They come from the way that the new academic precarity and regimes of quantitative "incentivisation" intellectuals are subject to "select for" many

of those attributes of academic work that always pushed against free inquiry in the older configurations: the deference to established authorities rooted in asymmetries of institutional and symbolic capital; the willingness to give and receive flattery in order to climb the “winding stair”; the tendency of academic work, in the humanities, to be individually-based and tendentially atomising; and the insular closure of disciplines upon themselves, ideally to promote intellectual freedom but, when faced with external threats, to guard established symbolic and institutional territory.

To combat despair, we should remember that intellectual freedom has never been the exclusive provenance of the universities. The renaissance, reformation, scientific revolution and enlightenment were all spearheaded by free thinkers located outside of the academy. But to combat the internal and external forces working against intellectual freedom within the neoliberal academy will take a long struggle, a significant change in the wider terms of public discourse, and not least, a good deal of fearless speech.